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ABSTRACT

The particular way in which songs (and especially the songs of social movements) accumulate persuasive force has been the subject of much scholarly inquiry. This paper investigates the rhetorical power of the popular musical text, "We Shall Overcome," arguing that the song endures as an almost expected rhetorical feature of any social movement concerned with civil rights. The paper suggests that "We Shall Overcome" is a unique song of persuasion in that it demonstrates the ontological force of rhetoric: the song empowers rhetors and audiences alike through the enactment of an open text. Following a brief discussion that describes the evolution of the text through multiple contexts, the paper elaborates the argument by examining three rhetorical characteristics of the song: (1) the song as an open text; (2) the participatory nature of this unique form (singing) of rhetoric; and (3) the quasi-religious lyrical theme and the quasi-ritualistic nature of the song's performance. The paper concludes with an explanation of the ways in which the song empowers its rhetors and audiences in light of the connection between rhetoric and ontology. (Contains 46 references.) (RS)

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Martha Cooper and Gary Burns

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"WE SHALL OVERCOME": ONTOLOGY AND RHETORIC

Martha Cooper

and

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"We Shall Overcome" has been sung around the world. Originally a gospel hymn in the Black church in the United States, the song is most closely associated with the Civil Rights Movement in the United States. However, as a song with a history of at least a quarter of a century, "We Shall Overcome" endures as an almost expected rhetorical feature of any social movement concerned with civil rights. The purpose of this essay is to investigate the rhetorical power of this popular music text.

Various scholars have pointed out the persuasive potential of music within social movements.[1] Among the first to investigate the persuasive potential of song, Denisoff argued that "songs of persuasion" function to achieve six goals:

1. The song attempts to solicit and arouse outside support and sympathy for a social or political movement.
2. The song reinforces the value structure of individuals who are active supporters of the social movement or ideology.
3. The song creates and promotes cohesion, solidarity, and high morale in an organization or movement supporting its world view.

4. The song is an attempt to recruit individuals for a specific social movement.
5. The song invokes solutions to real or imagined social phenomena in terms of action to achieve a desired goal.
6. The song points to some problem or discontent in the society, usually in emotional terms.[2]

While it may be argued that "We Shall Overcome" performs all six of these functions, its persuasive force resides most clearly in its ability to create and promote cohesion, solidarity and high morale. As Denisoff explained regarding its use during the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, "We Shall Overcome" emphasized "the strength-in-unity pattern of the movement and that in individualistic terms the participant is not isolated but a segment of a group."[3] Thus the psychological and sociological impact of the song merits investigation.

The particular ways in which songs, especially the songs of social movements, accumulate persuasive force has been the subject of much scholarly inquiry.[4] A recent study by Stewart, Smith, and Denton examined the manifest content of 714 songs written for or adopted by 21 American social movements in order to verify the rhetorical characteristics of social movement songs suggested by previous critical studies.[5] Their conclusions revealed the following:

The majority of songs described the present, identified one or more devils, listed demands or solutions, and

> urged listeners or participants to act. . . . The selected social movement songs from 21 movements tended to be negative rather than positive, pessimistic rather than optimistic, general rather than specific, and mild rather than abrasive in language. . . . A minority attempted to enhance self-concept (identity or self-worth). . . . They dwelt upon large problems rather than individuals and tended to identify abstract demands (freedom, equality, liberty, justice) rather than specific problems or solutions. . . . A minority urged audiences to remain committed to the cause and assured them of ultimate victory.[6]

"We Shall Overcome" deviates from nearly every central tendency described by Stewart, Smith and Denton. It focuses on the future rather than the present, is generally positive and optimistic in its forecast of the future, identifies no devils, enhances self-concept, and urges audiences to remain committed to the cause. Only in its level of abstraction and generality does "We Shall Overcome" conform to these findings. The exceptional nature of the song when compared to the norm thus encourages an investigation into its rhetorical characteristics.

Our argument, put simply, is that "We Shall Overcome" is a unique song of persuasion in that it demonstrates the ontological force of rhetoric. As a participatory form of rhetorical action that is performed quasi-ritualistically, "We Shall Overcome" empowers rhetors and audiences alike through the enactment of an

open text. Following a brief discussion that describes the evolution of this text through multiple contexts, we elaborate this argument by examining three rhetorical characteristics of the song. First, we describe the song as an open text. Next, we discuss the participatory nature of this unique form of rhetoric. Third, we describe the quasi-ritualistic nature of the song's performance. Finally, we conclude with an explanation of the ways in which the song empowers its rhetors and audiences in light of the connection between rhetoric and ontology.

EVOLVING TEXT WITHIN MULTIPLE CONTEXTS

Characteristically, rhetoric is seen as a response to a particular situation.[7] Consequently, the relationship between text and context draws significant attention from rhetorical critics.[8] However, as postmodern thinkers such as Michel Foucault point out, frequently a text, because of its material existence, may be presented in multiple contexts by diverse rhetors who appropriate the text for their own purposes.[9] Over time and through multiple rhetorical situations, a text's relationship to context may change. However, according to Foucault, "if the information content and the uses to which it could be put are the same, one can say that it is the same statement [text] in each case.[10] This is the case with "We Shall Overcome" as the song has been appropriated, sometimes modified, and reappropriated through multiple situations. Even so, the function of the song as a rhetorical means of empowerment appears

to persist across time and situations.

Originally called "I'll Overcome" or "I'll Be All Right," "We Shall Overcome" began as a "gospel hymn sung in black churches through much of the South."[11] The words for the hymn were:

> I'll be all right . . .
> I'll be like him . . .
> I'll wear the crown . . .
> I'll sing my song someday . . .
> I'll overcome.[12]

Concentrating on the spiritual connection of the individual with God, the hymn offered an affirmation to those who sang for the future.

In 1945, striking tobacco workers in Charleston, South Carolina, adapted the song to their needs on the picket line.[13] Lillie Mae Doster, one of the picket captains, remembers it this way:

> To keep up morale, the remaining pickets would 'sing themselves away' some days. We sang 'I'll be all right . . . we will win our rights . . . we will win this fight . . . we will organize . . . we will overcome.' We sang it with a clap and a shout until sometimes the cops would quiet us down.[14]

Even without the direct religious allusions, the song affirmed the power of those who sang it by pointing out what they would do in the future. The change from "I'll be alright" to "We will

overcome" modified the affirmation from one that was oriented toward an individual's worth and spiritual connection to one that valorized the group. Hence, a collective affirmation evolved from a personal affirmation.

In 1946, members of the Food, Tobacco and Agricultural Workers Union gathered for a workshop at the Highlander Folk School, a cooperative institution founded in 1932 and dedicated to training organizers who fought for better working conditions for rural laborers.[15] Zilphia Horton, music director at the Highlander School, "adapted We Will Overcome to a style she could sing and teach to others as she travelled around the South to union halls and community centers," and for the next 15 years it was sung at every workshop conducted at Highlander.[16] During that time, Pete Seeger changed the verb from "will" to "shall," and a variety of additional verses were composed by participants in the workshops.[17] For example, Jamilia Jones, a participant in one of the Highlander workshops, recalled an incident in which men with guns and clubs attempted to intimidate workshop participants under the cover of darkness, during which the line "we are not afraid" was born:

> There was lots of fear. . . . Somebody started humming and singing "We Shall Overcome" . . . . Two hours it lasted. "We are not afraid" helped convince us we weren't afraid. It kept us unafraid and unnerved the thugs.[18]

Seeger's adaptation reinforced the future orientation of the

song. Similarly, new verses such as "we are not afraid" underscored the spirit of affirmation unique to the song.

In 1958, Martin Luther King heard the song at Highlander and commented: "We Shall Overcome. That song really sticks with you, doesn't it?"[19] By 1960, the new music director at Highlander, Guy Carawan, was teaching the song to people in the Sit-in Movement, the beginning of the contemporary Civil Rights Movement, throughout the South.[20] The song quickly became the anthem of the Civil Rights Movement, sung at the founding convention of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), at numerous marches and sit-ins throughout the South, and at the famous March on Washington in 1963. Martin Luther King credited this and other "freedom songs" with "unifying the movement, giving it the will to continue, and creating new courage in the rank and file members."[21]

Since Lyndon Johnson's borrowing of the line "we shall overcome" in his speech calling for the Voting Rights Bill, the song is most closely associated with the Civil Rights Movement. However, since 1964, the song has been sung in relationship to a variety of other movements throughout the world. As contemporary news reports indicate, the song has been sung in contemporary situations as diverse as Prague Square during the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia in 1989 and during a candlelight march to mourn police neglect of Jeffrey Dahmer's victims in Milwaukee in 1991. Sung in Spanish by peasants or Chinese during the demonstrations in Tianneman Square, the song has retained its

identity even as it undergoes changes. As Guy and Candie Carawan observe:

> . . . the song had a life of its own. It literally went around the world and was used by people struggling in every imaginable situation, having become an international symbol of people fighting for freedom. . . . And it is being sung today as people look for ways to confront racism, unemployment, hunger, discrimination, and all forms of oppression. As long as people are willing to struggle and join together to fight for their rights, and as long as there is hope that winning is possible, "We Shall Overcome" will be relevant.[22]

That the song empowers those who sing it by affirming their strength and hope in the future seems clear. Just how such empowerment is accomplished in diverse rhetorical situations is less obvious. Several characteristics of the song are pivotal. First, the song is an open text. Second, the song is an example of participatory rhetoric. Third, the song is generally performed in a quasi-ritualistic mode. We discuss each of these characteristics in turn.

OPEN TEXT

In theory, it is possible for anybody to appropriate any song for any purpose. In practice, some songs are more adaptable than others and more effective when appropriated. This is true

both for formal reasons and because every song has a cultural history. Formal characteristics make some songs easier to sing than others, easier to fit with new lyrics, and more enjoyable to hear. The cultural history of a song gives impetus and meaning to any new uses of it. "We Shall Overcome" is a case in which formal qualities and cultural history combine to create an open text that is both susceptible to multiple "readings" and that is subject to various uses through performance and adaptation by different people in different situations.

Openness, however, has its flipside in the form of embedded meaning that cannot be removed, only rearranged. "We Shall Overcome" is not a tabula rasa. It began as a hymn and sounds like a hymn. The many uses and possible interpretations of the song, open as they are in numerous ways, are nonetheless defined in part by the song's religious roots. "We Shall Overcome" is open in allowing new causes and situations to be juxtaposed with religion, but not open to any attempt (for whatever reason) to escape religion as a point of reference.

For this reason, the song is more useful in some ways than in others. In particular, it is useful in giving a sacred context to such "profane" activities as strikes, demonstrations, and arrests. Out of all the possible songs that could be used for such a purpose, "We Shall Overcome" is certainly the most common choice, and part of the explanation for this lies in the formal qualities and cultural history of the song.

Musically, the song has a sixteen-bar, diatonic melody with

a range of a ninth.[23] The widest interval is a fifth. For the most part, the melody simply moves up and down the diatonic scale, one step or half-step at a time. What this means is that the song is easy to sing, and sing well. The musical structure of the song should "make sense" to practically anybody in the Western world. It is not much more complicated than a nursery rhyme-type melody like "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star" or "The Farmer in the Dell."

Harmonically, "We Shall Overcome" is also fairly simple, although various elaborations are possible. The sheet music version in Guy and Candie Carawan's songbook <u>We Shall Overcome!</u> uses seven chords.[24] This is not many, but two of the seven might be considered embellishments or substitutions. Strumming the song on a guitar, one could do quite nicely with only five chords.

The chord changes follow patterns quite familiar in Western music, particularly in hymns. The ending of "We Shall Overcome" is similar to that of "O Come, All Ye Faithful" and "Onward, Christian Soldiers." Other passages harmonically resemble other religious songs, including "O Holy Night," "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel," and "We Three Kings." In more of a pop vein, the middle of "We Shall Overcome" is copied harmonically in "Puff, the Magic Dragon." The chords underlying the lyric "I do believe," in "We Shall Overcome," are duplicated (with similar lyrics) in "Peace Train." It is in its harmony that "We Shall Overcome" most definitively displays its musical adherence to two

genres, namely hymns and contemporary folk-pop songs.

Rhythmically, "We Shall Overcome" is adaptable. While in principle any song can be adapted to any rhythm and played at any tempo, deviations from the original or familiar heartbeat of a song will often not sound pleasing, because they may require awkward timing or phrasing of lyrics, melody, or chord changes. "We Shall Overcome" does not have any of these problems and is shown off, effectively, in various rhythms and tempos in the We Shall Overcome television documentary.

A user-friendly musical structure, such as that of "We Shall Overcome," is not a sufficient condition for a song to become a communal tool, but it is a necessary condition. For a contrasting example, we need only look at "The Star Spangled Banner." The national anthem has a well deserved reputation as a song that is very difficult to sing, even for professional singers. The melody is chromatic and ranges over a twelfth, with many wide intervals, including a tenth. The verse is long and easy to forget. The harmony is abstruse and would be hard to strum on a guitar. The rhythm becomes amorphous at the end of most renditions, and it is difficult to imagine the song in a different time signature than the familiar 3/4, or at a tempo much faster or slower than that used at the ballpark. The words, even if they were grammatically and poetically meritorious (which they are not), would suffer in any adaptation, since they are poorly wedded to the melody in the first place. Jimi Hendrix demonstrated what is probably the most sensible approach to

adapting the anthem--ignore harmony, rhythm, and lyrics; use only the melody, and use it as spectacle.

Thus, although "The Star Spangled Banner" supposedly binds Americans in a patriotic unity, it is hard to imagine anyone singing it spontaneously, or adding new words, or singing it in a group without instrumental accompaniment to keep everyone in tune. The unity we experience in this song is one of deference to the past (specifically, the War of 1812) and to an authority as represented by the flag, by sports leagues and franchises, and by broadcasting stations that play the anthem at sign-on and sign-off.[25] "The Star Spangled Banner" is relatively closed to new interpretations and uses, primarily because of its daunting musical structure and opaque lyrics. When Hendrix wanted to suggest a new meaning for the song, he could do so only by ravaging it.

Lack of musical complexity in a song like "We Shall Overcome" makes it easy to learn the song, teach it to others, and make up new words. Such propagation and adaptation are hallmarks of folk music as we know it, but "We Shall Overcome" is an extreme case. It is, in a sense, not so much a song as a formula for a song. The most familiar words are:

(1) We shall overcome.

(2) We shall overcome.

(3) We shall overcome someday.

(4) Deep in my heart, I do believe

(5) We shall overcome someday.

The "formula" for creating new verses is simple. Line (4) remains constant. "[S]omeday" in lines (3) and (5) can be changed to "today" if necessary. Various sentences can be substituted for lines (1) and (2). Preferably the substituted sentence would have five syllables, but that is not a firm requirement.

Thus, a whole new verse is indexed by a sentence of about five syllables (e.g., "We'll walk hand in hand"; "The truth will make us free"; "We are not afraid"; and so on). In effect, the verse is a blank that can be filled in by anyone on the spur of the moment. Anyone who makes up a new sentence for use as a verse is an instant "author" and can instantly "teach" the whole new verse to a crowd of singers merely by uttering the sentence. The formula for converting the sentence into a new verse has become standardized and widely known through usage and publicity.

All nine verses printed in the songbooks We Shall Overcome! and The Ballad of America combine first person plural and singular pronouns (with the singular always coming in the line "Deep in my heart, I do believe").[26] Each verse is therefore a statement about what I "believe" about we or us. The individual as singer is always part of a larger group whose identity depends not at all upon the lyrics themselves, but upon the situation in which the song is being sung. Even for a listener who is not also singing along, the first person plural pronoun is a seductive invitation to identify with others. The most familiar posture of the popular music audience is that of overhearing (so

to speak) "I" singing to an absent "you" about love. The convention that enables the listener to eavesdrop on these public intimacies is the audio equivalent of the fourth wall in theater and film.[27] The pronoun "we" in "We Shall Overcome" puts the listener in a different posture--not that of spectator at a drama, but that of an addressee potentially encompassed in the first person plural. The pronoun "we" invites the listener in, while "you" as it is usually used in love songs creates a much clearer linguistic boundary between singer and listener.

PARTICIPATION

The participatory form of "We Shall Overcome" also helps explain its power to unify a group and overcome individual isolation. There are several ways in which the song encourages participation, not the least of which is the very form of rhetoric that it embodies. Singing is a performative act just as speaking is. Such performance typically involves self-risk as the singer musters the necessary courage for self-presentation. Other theorists have described the nature of self-risk and self-awareness that accompanies the act of speaking.[28] However, singing entails a slightly different type of risk. The lyrics and melody of a song are often attributable to another, but one's performance of those lyrics and melody is only attributable to the self. Perhaps this is why so many people experience at least a little embarrassment or reticence as they begin singing. Singing requires active engagement. This is particularly true

with "We Shall Overcome" as it is a song to be sung rather than a song to be listened to. The security of passive listening is replaced by the risk of performance when someone begins to sing.

While the act of singing seems inherently to evoke the risk associated with performance, the singing of "We Shall Overcome" modulates that risk because "We Shall Overcome" is typically performed by a group. Most often the song is performed by people who are physically connected as they cross arms and hold hands, swaying with the music. The security of numbers and the physical proximity of others encourages a sense of community, a feeling of belonging at least for the time during which the song is sung. Thus, while each individual may feel a remnant of performance anxiety, the experience of community common to the performance of this particular song enhances a sense of interconnectedness. Within such a milieu, singers are not encouraged to listen to themselves or to another but are encouraged simply to be a part of the group. The experience is similar, if not identical, to the singing of a hymn by a church congregation. Unlike the experience of a solo performance, or the experience of listening to a choir perform the same hymn, the experience of singing with the congregation is one of belonging. The focus shifts from performance or appreciation to participation.

Several unique features of "We Shall Overcome" explain why it lends itself so easily to group participation. First, the simplicity of the song invites participation. As discussed earlier, both the lyrics and the music of "We Shall Overcome" are

simple and highly repetitive. Denisoff explains that "folksongs of protest" can only meet their persuasive functions if they "fulfill certain structural prerequisites," including that "the song must have an ease of communication, that is, be familiar to and have a simplistic musical scale facilitating audience attention and participation."[29]

But beyond its repetitive simplicity, "We Shall Overcome" invites participation because of its unique form of participation. In her study of the songs of the Civil Rights Movement, Bernice Reagon classifies "We Shall Overcome" as a "group participation song" that was "easily sung by masses of people as they participated in various group activities of the Movement" because its musical structure is derived from a "traditional African pattern of call and response."[30] She explains:

> [Group participation songs] utilized a chorus structure wherein the lyrics of each new chorus were determined by a line fed to the congregation by a leader or a member of the congregation. "We Shall Overcome," the song which came to symbolize the Movement and on an international scale typify struggle against oppression, was of this type.[31]

Just as important as the call and response pattern of the song, is the openness of the text regarding who may issue the call. Literally any of the singers may supply a new line for the familiar chorus structure. As an authorless text, the song is

readily adapted by whoever sings it. Writing about group participation songs, generally, Reagon elaborates:

> Another characteristic of the "group participation" songs was the difficulty of establishing authorship. In cases where one or two persons could be identified as forming or adapting a new freedom song, very little value was given to their authorship. Each execution or performance of the song made a new song, which changed with each singing. Singers felt free to mix verses, make up new ones, add new inflections without much attention to the individual who had originally brought it to its new status as a freedom song.[32]

The history of the evolution of "We Shall Overcome" documents its many adaptations and modifications as the song has been appropriated by different groups in different circumstances. Such adaptation and appropriation is only possible because of its lack of stable authorship. As one historian of the Civil Rights Movement explained, the song is like Black culture that "treats language as a treasure that everyone created, everyone shared, and no one owned."[33]

Both the open structure of the song and its lack of authorship allow "We Shall Overcome" to function as a communicative act in which ordinary people may participate. Reagon concludes that the music of the Civil Rights Movement was unique in that masses of people could participate. Ordinary members of the movement could sing "We Shall Overcome" just as

they could march or sit-in, in contrast to the performances demanded of the leaders of the movement who were expected to perform more solitary acts such as delivering stirring orations.[34] The motivation for the masses to sing the song seems to flow at least in part from the participatory nature of the song. One report of its singing during the Civil Rights Movement is illustrative:

> The behavior of crowds illustrates dramatically that people, whose personal histories vary widely behave in exactly the same way when confronted by a common, powerful, immediate influence. I have seen several hundred white people in Atlanta who came to a Negro college to hear a favorite folk singer--their farthest reach from racial liberation--caught up in the spirit of his singing, and joining hands with Negroes and whites near them to sing "We Shall Overcome," the battle song of the student sit-in movement. Five minutes later, perhaps a little shaken by the experience, they might have left the auditorium wondering how in the world they could do this. But at this moment of common response they did as everyone did--as the situation, rather than instinct and tradition demanded.[35]

The call to belong and be a part of "the group" that is characteristic of the singing of "We Shall Overcome" thus helps to explain its usefulness for solidifying a grassroots movement.

QUASI-RITUAL

If "We Shall Overcome" is in one respect a "formula" for a song, it is also one ingredient in a larger "formula" for ritualistic public events, particularly for demonstrations and other public gatherings concerned with civil rights, however those rights may be defined. According to various scholars, a ritual is an action that must be performed in certain ways, not for practical, legal or physical reasons but because social custom or religious law rewards or requires doing so and perhaps threatens punishment for failing to do so.[36] "We Shall Overcome" functions ritualistically in that it encourages identification with a particular social role and religious creed on those occasions in which people participate in its singing.

In the same way that hymns sung at church services bind a congregation for several minutes in a common behavior and expression, the singing of "We Shall Overcome" binds a group of people both in musical-verbal expression and in the holding of hands. By convention, the hand holding is often done with arms crossed, so that one's right hand touches the person on one's left, and one's left hand touches the person on one's right. The adoption of a special body position gives the singing of the song added meaning as a ritual. The individual singer is part of a chain of handholders that represents both the actual "congregation" present at that moment and, at a larger symbolic level, a whole community or even the entire human race. In addition, crossed arms restrict one's freedom of movement and

force people to stand closer together in order to hold hands. It is also common for the people holding hands to sway back and forth in approximate synchronization with the song's rhythm, so that participation in a group performance of the song is both social and physical in a distinctive way.

By connecting in such a manner with a particular group of people (those physically present at the event), one connects symbolically with a much larger group that includes, at a minimum, all those people living and dead who have ever sung and believed in the song. By now this is quite a large group, extending to every corner of the world. More meaningful than this geographic spread, however, is "We Shall Overcome"'s continued importance over a period of time, especially since the 1950s but dating back even further.

This temporal significance situates "We Shall Overcome" as an excellent example of communication as ritual. In James W. Carey's account of the "ritual view" of communication, the "archetypal case" of communication is "the sacred ceremony that draws persons together in fellowship and commonality." Such a view of communication "is directed not toward the extension of messages in space but toward the maintenance of society in time; not the act of imparting information but the representation of shared beliefs."[37] By reaffirming what the singers already believe, the singing of "We Shall Overcome" helps to preserve the community of believers and unite the immediate gathering in a transcendent bond with a timeless and authentic "congregation" of

ancestors.

The quasi-religious lyrical theme and performance ritual of "We Shall Overcome" are, of course, nondenominational and vague enough to accommodate a person of any, or no, religion. By being so nebulous, the song is able to redefine religion subtly, or at least refocus the singers' righteous fervor, away from the deity and other overtly religious concerns, and toward a more secular or abstract cause, usually civil rights.

Despite the feeling the song provides of universal harmony and triumph over an unspecified and only faintly implied enemy, there is a limit to "We Shall Overcome"'s capacity to engulf all comers in the warm glow of comradeship. Civil rights remains a struggle against powerful enemies, some of whom pretend to be friends. In particular, politicians often occupy ambiguous positions vis-a-vis the Civil Rights Movement. George Bush is a case in point. The "Willie Horton" television commercials in Bush's 1988 campaign for President are notorious as examples of race-baiting. As President, Bush exploited the issue of "quotas" in opposing civil rights legislation. Some commentators maintain that Bush cleared a path for David Duke (Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan from 1975 to 1980 and founder of the National Association for the Advancement of White People) to become a nationally prominent politician.[38]

In light of Bush's highly questionable record on civil rights, it was a surprise to see television pictures of him singing "We Shall Overcome" at the King Center in Atlanta,

holding hands with Coretta Scott King and swaying, on January 17, 1992." The most charitable interpretation one can give this event is that the power of the ritual singing of "We Shall Overcome" and the moral force of the civil rights struggle transcends the political actions of President Bush and incorporates him into a worthy cause that he has previously tried to avoid or undermine. The ritual works some sort of transformation upon Bush, the nature and extent of which remain unknown. A more cynical interpretation is that Bush's presence disrupts the ritual and subverts its meaning, turning it into a photo opportunity, which is a ritual of a different sort. Perhaps Bush's participation was merely a matter of politeness, as in saying grace at dinner or singing at a certain point in a church service. However, questions remain. What is it that President Bush shall overcome? Do "we" have a coherent identity that includes George Bush?

These questions reach to the heart of the meaning of "We Shall Overcome" as a ritual. Whatever Bush's motivation may have been, his singing of "We Shall Overcome" acknowledged the existence of the ritual and was an act of submission. That he felt empowered as a result is doubtful, but then empowerment is for the powerless. Ultimately, the moral weight of the civil rights struggle forces some deference by mainstream authority to the sacred symbols and occasions of the movement. Singing "We Shall Overcome" is just such a sacred occasion, comparable to saying a prayer.

Prayer is an act of purification and redemption, and so is the ritual singing of "We Shall Overcome." By placing "overcome" in the future tense, the singer acknowledges and in a sense celebrates present difficulties and the struggle to surmount them. The singer is redeemed through the sacrifice of self necessitated by the harsh realities of the present.[40] Group singing establishes sacrifice and redemption as collective processes given credibility and force through the symbolic agency of ritual.

EMPOWERMENT

While the song's nature as an open text that embodies participatory rhetoric helps account for the ease with which "We Shall Overcome" is adapted and appropriated for multiple rhetorical situations, its characteristic performance as ritual provides an entry for understanding how it empowers those who sing the song. As our discussion throughout this essay suggests, singing "We Shall Overcome" is comparable to a religious experience. The song works as a collective affirmation for singers by bringing being into focus and emphasizing the future. The spiritual roots of the song help to account for its affirming effect. The cultural history of the song provides an implicit association with the spiritual world. Because of its roots as a hymn, the ritual performance of the song manifests a spiritual connection. The lyrics reinforce a sense of hope and optimism by making that spiritual association more explicit. This occurs in

several ways.

First, the lyrics of the song direct those who sing and hear it inward. As Denisoff explains, "like the Psalms," such songs "are directed to those within a movement or picket line rather than to a general audience."[41] Regardless of the verse, the subject of the song is the singer--"I" or "we." What is to be overcome, the enemy, is not specified. By concentrating on the self, especially the collective self of the movement, the song affirms the existence of that individual or collective self. Consequently, the predicate of each verse is always located within the self. It is the self that is "not afraid," that is "like God," that "shall overcome someday." Undistracted by the opposition, by other agents, the lyrics center singers on themselves.

Second, the lyrics of the song call being into focus by projecting the future. Although some verses concentrate on the present, such as "we <u>are</u> not afraid," most of the song is devoted to future tense. In his study of the persuasive force of arguments that embrace future actions, Cox relies on Heidegger to explain that the interaction between our perception of time and human meaning gives an ontological dimension to discourse:

> The meaning of our experience is rooted, not in a succession of particular Nows, but in a field or temporal spread of Future-Present-Past. . . . The unifying thread in this temporal field is <u>future</u> time; it is our anticipation of future (potentiality-for-

Being) which constitutes and informs our present understanding. Within this structuring framework of time, we are able to establish our lives meaningfully; we can entertain hope, make plans, act, or organize projects.[42]

"We Shall Overcome" projects a future in which the singers will have overcome, will walk hand in hand with God, will be secure, thus giving meaning to their present struggle.

However, the projection of future time within the lyrics is contextualized within a present belief system as all such future events are predicated on a present tense belief ("Deep in my heart, I do believe"). By projecting future time while situating the singers in present time, the song manifests a third type of spiritual connection by invoking a sense of "sacred time." Eliade explains that sacred time "is a primordial mythical time made present."[43] In explaining the power of arguments that invoke such sacred time, Cox refers to the findings of critics who have investigated the power of myth and explains that arguments that invoke sacred time are least amenable to logical refutation because they "draw from a reservoir of myth, a complex of psychic and cultural associations of enormous nonrational persuasion."[44]

The sacred time that "We Shall Overcome" invokes is one that affirms the spiritual connectedness of the singers. The present tense belief regarding future events is what allows the song to function as an affirmation and gives a hopeful cast to the future

projection. The power of such affirmations has been explored at some length in the literature of psychotherapy and psychology.[45] However, a more rhetorical explanation emphasizes the reservoir of religious myth from which such an affirmation draws strength. On this point, Snow makes an important distinction between the rhetoric of an argument and the rhetoric of liturgy:

> It is a commonplace of rhetorical instruction that argument begins not with disagreement but with doubt. One might say that liturgy begins with faith: It is the acting out of the premises one accepts as truths. All the components of liturgy, including its language, are intended to move an audience to become participants. . . . Liturgy may be written but it cannot be read in the way that an argument can be read, alone and silently. To exist, liturgy depends upon the presence and participation of a group, or at least of 'two or three.'[46]

"We Shall Overcome" is a case in point of liturgical rhetoric. It begins with faith, allowing no doubt about overcoming adversity, because the singers believe deep in their hearts that they will overcome. In practice, the song is sung as a group, reinforcing the spiritual affirmation contained within the song. It is a collective affirmation.

Viewed as a collective affirmation, the ontological force of "We Shall Overcome" becomes apparent. Those who sing the song participate with others. Such participation simultaneously

reminds them of their individuality as they experience self risk and their connectedness as they experience community. The open nature of the text reinforces this paradoxical experience, allowing textual adaptation at the same time that the song's formula invokes traditions common to ritual. Most important, the tradition this ritual performance invokes is a spiritual tradition that turns the singers' attentions inward and outward simultaneously within a web of sacred time that intermingles present with future. All this occurs within a leap of faith, faith that stems from the individual's connection to community.

NOTES

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1. See, for example, R. Serge Denisoff, Sing A Song of Social Significance (Bowling Green: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1972); Charles J. Stewart, Craig Allen Smith, and Robert E. Denton, Jr., Persuasion and Social Movements, 2nd ed (Prospect Heights: Waveland, 1989), 213-232.

2. Denisoff, Sing, 2-3.

3. Denisoff, Sing, 4.

4. See: John David Bloodworth, "Communication in the Youth Counter Culture: Music as Expression," Central States Speech Journal 26 (1975): 304-309; Mark W. Booth, "The Art of Words in Song," Quarterly Journal of Speech 62 (1976): 242-249; David A. Carter, "The Industrial Workers of the World and the Rhetoric of Song," Quarterly Journal of Speech 66 (1980): 365-374; R. Serge Denisoff, "Folk Music and the American Left: A Generational-Ideological Comparison," British Journal of Sociology 20 (1969): 427-442; Alberto Gonzalez and John J. Makay, "Rhetorical Ascription and the Gospel According to Dylan," Quarterly Journal of Speech 69 (1983): 1-14; Carl Bryan Holmberg, "Toward the Rhetoric of Music," Southern Speech Communication Journal 51 (1985): 71-82; James R. Irvine and Walter G. Kirkpatrick, "The Musical Form in Rhetorical Exchange: Theoretical Considerations," Quarterly Journal of Speech 58 (1972): 272-284; Elizabeth J. Kizer, "Protest Song Lyrics as Rhetoric," Popular Music and Society 9 (1983): 3-11; Stephen Kosokoff and Carl W. Carmichael, "The Rhetoric of Protest: Song, Speech, and Attitude Change," Southern Speech Communication Journal 35 (1970): 295-302; Ralph E. Knupp, "A Time for Every Purpose Under Heaven: Rhetorical Dimensions of Protest Music," Southern Speech Communication Journal 46 (1981): 377-389; Cheryl Irwin Thomas, "'Look What They've Done to My Song, Ma': The Persuasiveness of Song," Southern Speech Communication Journal 35 (1970): 295-302. Concise historical accounts of American songs of persuasion and protest include David King Dunaway, "Music as Political Communication in the United States," in Popular Music and Communication, ed. James Lull (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1987), 36-52; Stephen N. Gottesman, "Tom Dooley's Children: An Overview of the Folk Music Revival, 1958-1965," Popular Music and Society 5 (1977): 61-78; and Jerome L.

Rodnitzky, "The New Revivalism: American Protest Songs, 1945-1968," South Atlantic Quarterly 70 (1971): 13-21.

5. Stewart, Smith, and Denton, Persuasion, 213-232.

6. Stewart, Smith, and Denton, Persuasion, 230.

7. Lloyd Bitzer, "The Rhetorical Situation," Philosophy and Rhetoric 1 (1968): 1-14.

8. While this critical stance is familiar to all rhetorical critics, it has been examined in most detail recently in Texts in Contexts, eds. Michael C. Leff and Fred J. Kauffeld (Davis, CA: Hermagoras Press, 1989).

9. Michel Foucault, The Archaeology of Knowledge, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 100-105.

10. Foucault, Archaeology, 104.

11. Pete Seeger, "We Shall Overcome," in Pete Seeger and Bob Reiser, Everybody Says Freedom (New York: Norton Press, 1989), 8. See also, Bernice Johnson Reagon, "Songs of the Civil Rights Movement 1955-1965: A Study in Culture History," unpub. diss. (Howard University 1975), 69-70; and R. Serge Denisoff, "The Religious Roots of the American Song of Persuasion," Western Folklore 29 (1970): 175-184.

12. Reported by Guy and Candie Carawan, "We Shall Overcome," Talkin' Union 7 (1983): 5.

13. Carawan and Carawan, "We," 5; Seeger, "We," 8; Denisoff, Great Day, 34.

14. Reported by Carawan and Carawan, "We," 5.

15. For a brief history of labor colleges, including Highlander, see, R. Serge Denisoff, Great Day Coming: Folk Music and the American Left (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971), 32-34; for an account of the 1946 workshop in which the song was learned by the staff at Highlander, see Carawan and Carawan, "We," 5.

16. Carawan and Carawan, "We," 5.

17. Pete Seeger, "We Shall Overcome", documentary, Producer Jim Brown (A Ginger Group Production, 1988).

18. Jamilia Jones, "We Shall Overcome", documentary. See also, Reagon, "Songs," 82.

19. Seeger, "We," 8.

20. Carawan and Carawan, "We," 5.

21. Reported by Denisoff, Sing, 146-147.

22. Carawan and Carawan, "We," 5.

23. For relatively simple explanations of musical terms, see George Thaddeus Jones, Music Theory (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1974). For popular music applications, see Gary Burns, "A Typology of 'Hooks' in Popular Records," Popular Music 6 (1987): 1-20.

24. Guy and Candie Carawan, comps., We Shall Overcome! Songs of the Southern Freedom Movement (New York: Oak Publications, 1963), p. 11.

25. On the history of "The Star Spangled Banner," see Scot M. Guenter, "The National Anthem: An Outgrowth of the Cult of the Flag," paper presented to the American Culture Association, Atlanta, 5 April 1986; and James Wierzbicki, "What So Proudly We Hail Indeed Has Foreign Roots," St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 8 July 1990, pp. 4C, 11C.

26. Carawan and Carawan, We Shall Overcome!; and John Anthony Scott, The Ballad of America: The History of the United States in Song and Story (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1967), pp. 352-353.

27. On the aesthetic convention of the "fourth wall," see Oscar Lee Brownstein and Darlene M. Daubert, Analytical Sourcebook of Concepts in Dramatic Theory (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1981), 52, 110, 149, 206, 231, and 277; and Michele Hilmes, "The Television Apparatus: Direct Address," Journal of Film and Video 37 (1985): 27-36.

28. Carroll C. Arnold, "Oral Rhetoric, Rhetoric, and Literature," Philosophy and Rhetoric 1 (1968): 191-210; see also, Henry W. Johnstone, Jr., "Some Reflections on Argumentation," in Maurice Natanson and Henry W. Johnstone, Jr., eds., Philosophy, Rhetoric, and Argumentation (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1965), 1-10.

29. Denisoff, Sing, 3; see also, Edith Fowke and Joe Glazer, Songs of Work and Freedom (Chicago: Roosevelt University Press, 1960).

30. Bernice Johnson Reagon, "Songs of the Civil Rights Movement 1955-1965: A Study in Culture History," unpub. diss. (Howard University 1975), 25-28.

31. Reagon, "Songs," 27.

32. Reagon, "Songs," 27.

33. Keith D. Miller, Voice of Deliverance: The Language of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Its Sources (New York: Free Press, 1992), p. 188.

34. Bernice Johnson Reagon, "Songs," 24.

35. Howard Zinn, The Southern Mystique (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1964), 77, reported in Reagon, "Songs," 21.

36. See Suzanne K. Langer, Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957); Erving Goffman, Relations in Public: Microstudies of the Public Order (New York: Harper & Row, 1972); Hugh Dalziel Duncan, Communication and Social Order (London: Oxford University Press, 1968).

37. James W. Carey, "A Cultural Approach to Communication," Communication As Culture: Essays on Media and Society (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 18.

38. See, Jason Berry, "Duke's Disquise," New York Times, 16 October 1991, p. A25; "The Many David Dukes," editorial, New York Times, 14 November 1991, p. A28; Michael Riley, "The Duke of Louisiana," Time, 4 November 1991, 29-33; Bill Turque, et. al., "David Duke: A Nightmare Scenario," Newsweek, 4 November 1991, 33; and Bill Turque, et. al., "The Real David Duke," Newsweek, 18 November 1991, 24-28.

39. For a newspaper account, see Mary T. Schmich, "Bush, Foes Unite to Honor King," Chicago Tribune, Dupage Edition, 18 January 1992, sec. 1, 1,12.

40. On the concept of music as a sacrificial ritual and as prayer, see Jacques Attali, Noise: The Political Economy of Music, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), esp. pp. 21-45.

41. Denisoff, Sing, 147.

42. J. Robert Cox, "The Die is Cast: Topical and Ontological Dimensions of the Locus of the Irreparable," Quarterly Journal of Speech 68 (1982): 232; see also, Martin Heidegger, Being and Time, trans. John Macquairie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962).

43.Mircea Eliade, The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion (New York: Harvest, 1959), p. 68.

44.Cox, 234; see also, Martha solomon, "The 'Positive Woman's' Journey: A Mythic Analysis of the Rhetoric of STOP-ERA," Quarterly Journal of Speech 65 (1979): 263.

45.See, for example, Raymond Studzinski, "Transcending a Past: From Remorse to Reconciliation in the Aging Process," Psychotherapy-Patient 5 (1988): 207-218; see also, C. Jerry Downing, "Affirmations: Steps to Counter Negative, Self-fulfilling Prophecies," Elementary School Guidance and Counseling 20 (1986): 174-179

46.Malinda Snow, "Martin Luther King's 'Letter From Birmingham Jail' as Pauline Epistle," Quarterly Journal of Speech 71 (1985): 331.